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Latin America Review

2 November 1979

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Argentina: General Viola's Mission Grows [redacted] 3.5(c)

Commander of the Army Lt. Gen. Roberto Viola is rapidly emerging as the central figure in the military government's program to bring political, social, and economic change to Argentina. He is expected to play a key role in resolving disparate views within the military leadership concerning how to effect this national reorganization. Should Viola succeed President Videla in March 1981--as now seems likely--he may be given a mandate to lay the groundwork for a return to civilian rule. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Viola is the senior member of the ruling military junta, as well as Videla's closest confidant and strongest supporter. The general, like Videla a political moderate, assumed the Army's top job in August 1978, but only after a promise to military hardliners that he would resign his commission this December. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Because of continuing policy disagreements with the hardliners, Viola's impending retirement from the military is fraught with problems. In order to provide continuity for Videla's moderate policies and to prepare for his own accession to the presidency, Viola probably will seek to neutralize those hardliners who pose a threat to the planned succession. [redacted] 3.5(c)

An abortive revolt in Cordoba Province by one of the government's two principal antagonists, Army III Corps Commander Luciano Menendez, should make Viola's task easier. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Menendez, who was distraught over the release of political detainee Jacobo Timerman and over renewed terrorist activity by the leftist Montoneros, on 29 and 30 September made a desperate bid to oust Viola as Army commander. Alerted to Menendez's rebellion, Viola moved swiftly to relieve him of his command. Although Menendez's redoubt was quickly surrounded by 4,000 paratroopers

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loyal to Viola, he held out for two days. A visit to Army headquarters in Buenos Aires finally convinced him that his ill-conceived putsch had failed. 3.5(c)

Menendez was subsequently placed under 90-day house arrest and retired from the Army. His deputy received 60 days' house arrest. The two commanders of the engineer and artillery units that supported the rebellion were dismissed, along with three retired officers who helped publicize the revolt in the Cordoba media. Six other colonels from the III Corps were arrested. 3.5(c)

Although some military officers believe that Menendez's lenient punishment reflects Viola's unwillingness to confront the hardliners, in fact Menendez's incarceration will last through the end-of-year military promotion and retirement cycle. Thus, he will be muzzled during the period that crucial decisions will be made concerning the military succession. 3.5(c)

With Menendez effectively out of the picture, the other key Army hardliner--Chief of Staff General Suarez-Mason--probably has suffered a sharp reversal in his bid to succeed Viola as head of the Army. When Menendez's revolt was announced, Suarez-Mason--who commands no field troops--had little choice but to side with Viola. Confident that Suarez-Mason would be unable to cause trouble during the rebellion, the Army commander and Videla left him in charge while they attended a military ceremony outside the capital. 3.5(c)

Viola may now be free to name a moderate successor as Army commander and to ease Suarez-Mason into retirement. This would represent an important victory by the moderates which would be reflected in government policy. Although both Videla and Viola are determined to suppress the newly revived terrorist movement ruthlessly, policies affecting the human rights of peaceful political dissidents probably would be further liberalized. Political parties, which are now officially proscribed, could resume activities as early as next summer. A mutually beneficial dialogue would be facilitated with the once powerful labor movement, which the government has held under tight control since 1976. In addition, pressures to pursue a military solution over the Beagle Channel controversy with Chile would be reduced. 3.5(c)

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Lt. Gen. Roberto Viola,
Commander in Chief of the Argentine Army
and member of the ruling military junta

[redacted] 3.5(c)

Assuming that Viola can resolve the succession issue to his satisfaction--[redacted]--he reportedly will use the period from his retirement to his designation as president-select next September to develop a civilian cadre capable of running the country. 3.3(b)(1)

*The source of this photo is Camera Press, London.

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